

Ideal Home

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Even before the First World War, the structure of society was changing rapidly in Britain. The march of the middle classes meant a new voice was demanding better lifestyles, better homes, greater independence. Nowhere were these demands more evident than in the housing market. Previously, only the great country houses had merited serious architectural consideration. Smaller homes were thrown together at the whim of the builder, with the occupier left meekly to accept the finished article.

But by the early years of the new century, the aspiring couple no longer wished to live in buildings that did not cater for the difficulties and demands of modern living. The Daily Mail's creator, Alfred Harmsworth, was quick to offer the public a revolutionary exhibition that not only opened up an array of facilities unparalleled anywhere in the world, but also gave incentive to architects and designers to confront the demands of the changing lifestyles – and hear the views of the customer.

Innovative, folksy, inspirational, a glossy magazine come to life, the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition began in 1908 as a revolution and is now a national institution. Nothing better reflects the trends over the past century, gathering as it does every aspect of homes and gardens under one roof. It has charted our social history and made a significant contribution to the nation's way of life – not least as the first showcase for inventions such as the vacuum cleaner, washing machine, refrigerator, pressure cooker, washable paint and mass-produced soap flakes.

It has been remarkable, too, for its extraordinary links with the royal families of Europe and the Near and Far East. No other exhibition could boast the patronage given to the Ideal Home. In 1923 the exhibition gardens were personally designed by six reigning monarchs. The whole of the Olympia annex was taken over, and the finished products assembled by noted nurserymen and landscape gardeners. The display was organized by Middlesex Hospital, which earned a shilling for every visitor to the gardens designed by Queen Alexandra, the Queen of the Netherlands, the Queen of Spain, the Queen of the Belgians, the Queen of Norway, the Queen of Romania, Princess Alice Countess of Athlone, Princess Mary, Lady Patricia Ramsay and Lady May Cambridge.

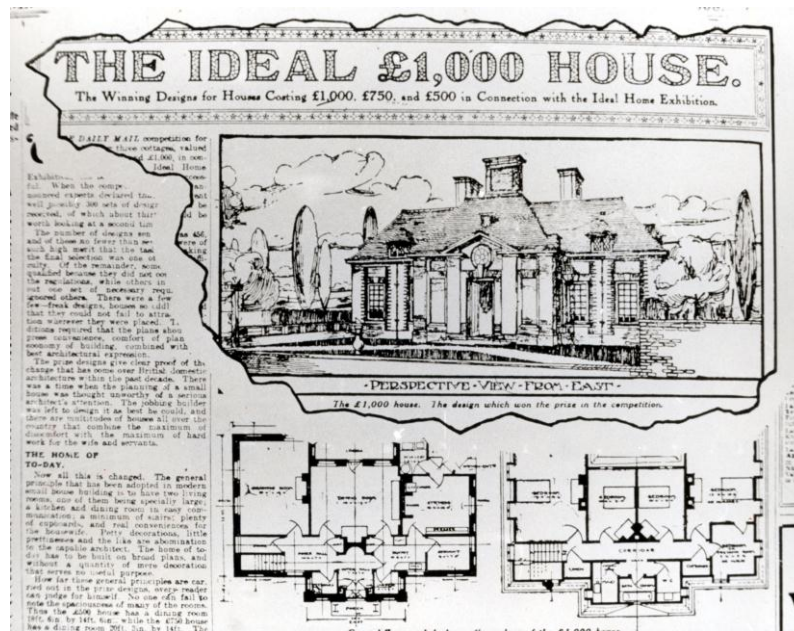


Along with members of the European royal families, celebrities such as the Frankenstein actor Boris Karloff and Grace Kelly, later the Princess of Monaco, also visited the Ideal Home exhibition

Today, royal visitors to the exhibition usually over-run their official schedule and several of them, Princess Margaret in particular, regularly returned for a private visit. Princess Diana enjoyed one trip so much she did not want to leave, and the Queen ensured that her first public outing after the birth of Prince Charles was a day at the Ideal Home Exhibition.

The first exhibition, at Olympia in 1908, centred around a competition to encourage architects to design an innovative home. It was judged by Mr EL – later Sir Edward – Lutyens, one of Britain's finest architects, who had designed the British Pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exhibition and went on to create the Cenotaph in Whitehall.

There were three categories – a detached five-bedroom mansion in landscaped ground ‘combining dignity, spaciousness and convenience’, to cost less than £1000 to build ; a detached cottage for under £750, and a ‘modest’ cottage, with six bedrooms for £500.



The winning design for the house that cost less than £1000 to build

The Daily Mail said: ‘There has been a rebellion against the old type of narrow, inconvenient houses such as are to be found in so many suburbs. Considerable difficulty is found in obtaining servants to stay in them.’ Special offers to go with the award-winning homes included bedroom suites at £7 17s 6d, ten blankets for 25 shillings and an oak dining suite of dresser, table and five chairs, with carpet thrown in, for just 25 guineas.

More than 200,000 people paid a shilling a head to visit that first exhibition and, like their successors in the decades to follow, they marvelled at the innovations on view. Billed as ‘The Wonder City’, the exhibition was put together by 3000 workers in a week. The result astonished reviewers: ‘As one strolled about, one realized that it is astonishing what an advance has been made in the everyday things in life. Even the most modest home contains treasures of comfort and convenience unknown even in the well-to-do homes of a century ago and undreamed of even by the most vivid imagination.’

Visitors were largely the affluent middle class, many of whom came to look at the latest technological wizardry – not necessarily to save time, but so that their servants could get jobs done to a higher standard. The typical new home might have had gas lights, an iron cooking range and cast iron guttering that froze solid in winter. The major innovation was the bathroom, a welcome advance from the tin bath in front of the fire.

In 1910 the appeal was to the newly wed with no experience in setting up a home – and included international hints on how to deal with the hoped-for outcome of a happy marriage. Parents may have been delighted with the ideal house of 1912 but domestic staff were probably less impressed by the planners’ idea that the servants’ room should double as an isolation ward, for any sick children in the house. By 1913 the exhibition was aiming to improve the life of the common man. Architects were challenged to design the best cottage ‘in an attempt to hasten a satisfactory solution to the important problem of housing the working classes in rural districts’. The winner contained three bedrooms, a good-sized living room, scullery, larder and a coal store entered from a lobby – ‘a great convenience in wet weather’. It sold for £175.



The Ideal House of 1912, which thrilled families but left domestic staff less impressed

At the end of the First World War the Daily Mail fought furiously for the right of the poor to better housing, and the campaign was reflected in the Ideal Home Exhibition. It campaigned, too, for better design to ease the burden of the mistress of the house. But the 1920 show, at a time when the whole country was clamouring for a solution to the housing shortage, brought a spectacular departure from the standard exhibition. Housing authorities were testing new building materials and construction systems in an effort to ease the crisis. The Mail wanted to hold an exhibition of as many new methods as possible, but decided that to build examples for display at Olympia and then dismantle them would be too extravagant at a time when materials were in short supply. With the kind of invention never achieved before or since, the paper decided to build a real village. The decision coincided with the development of the new 'Garden City' at Welwyn, and the Mail was given a plot for 41 homes.

Built by ex-servicemen and officers, many of them disabled, the village of Daily Mail was formally opened by Earl Haig in March 1922. It caused a sensation. Extra trains had to be laid on from London to cope with the number of visitors. The houses were shown for three months, then offered for sale at prices ranging from £750 for a three-bedroom cottage to £2100 for a four-bedroom Georgian-style home. Easy terms were available: an £800 house could be bought for monthly payments of £7 over 15 years. In 1996 the Georgian homes would sell for more than £200,000, and the village, renamed Meadow Green, is a stunning memorial to the vision of the twenties.



*(above) The Ideal Village at the very beginning of its construction in 1920
(below) A model of the Ideal Village, including its 41 homes*

The standard home of 1920 was a smaller house designed around labour-saving and more efficient domestic management. The Government was eager to employ the latest advances in technology and for once made a decision of profound common sense. Instead of dispatching teams of civil servants to the exhibition it sent a study group of far sterner mettle – a 50-strong company of Whitehall's most senior charladies.

After the war, even women of the affluent classes were facing the prospect of a decreasing number of servants and were taking a larger part in the running of the home. Manufacturers were quick to spot the changing role of the mistress of the house and labour-saving inventions, dubbed 'mechanical servants', were openly aimed at the new breed of 'housewife'. The new practical lifestyle was underlined by the ideas for nurseries, drawn up by a design team which included Princess Mary, the Queen of Norway, the crown Princess of Sweden, the Queen of Spain, the Queen of the Belgians and the Queen of Holland.

By 1926 a family home could cost £600, and the marital bed £20, as much as a skilled man's monthly wage. There was electric light and a wind-up gramophone in the living room, alongside the china cabinet. Luxuries for the modern housewife were an enamel gas cooker, a small lino floor and an electric fire in the bedroom.

The obvious interest of royalty in the exhibitions heightened the Government's sense of the Ideal Home's value, and the array of personalities prepared to take part in designs for living was seemingly endless. A classic of the type, and a charming illustration of the wealthier lifestyle of the period, came from Lady Oxford – whose husband, as Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, led his country united and unanimous into the First World War. She designed a room in 1929, advocating the essential nature of the library, a must in every home.

Meanwhile the housewife was getting to grips with the new technology. A year earlier the novelist Arnold Bennett, commissioned to cover the 1928 exhibition for the Mail, had speculated on the home of the future, forecasting solar heating and air conditioning. His major fear for the years ahead was equally accurate: 'The

four enemies of comfort on this island are noise, foul air, darkness and cold. I put noise first because I personally would sooner live stuffily, darkly and chillily than in a continuous or intermittent racket. Noise is perhaps the chief material defect of the newest civilization.'



New technology was not only dreamt of in the home, as shown by the Aerocar, created in 1928

By the 1930s, most women visiting the exhibition were making do with no more than the help of a 'daily', resulting in a boom for manufacturers who could improve the lot of the housewife: 'A penny spent on electric current saves hours of fatigue'. The 1930 exhibition featured 'The House That Jill Built' – the result of a competition for married women run by the Daily Mail 'to discover the requirements of intelligent women in connection with the modern house'. The winning entry was chosen because 'it embodies the most practical points in labour saving'. But it was hardly attractive.



Following the successful 'The House that Jill Built' competition, 'The House that Jack Built' was launched in 1931

Sensational (and not so sensational) ideas boomed during the thirties. The genius of artist Heath Robinson summed up the mood of the nation, and the exhibition organizers used his unique blueprints to build the house and every gadget in it. Two years later the essential in every home was 'The Housewife's Darling', the washing machine, billed as saving time, money and labour. But still pretty hard work for all that.

By 1936 the drive towards labour-saving was aimed at the family kitchen, with an avalanche of potato peelers, apple parers, stainless steel sinks and single-height work surfaces. Stars came from far and wide to catch up with the latest developments. In 1937, dominating Gardens for Lovers and the Coronation Fashion Reviews,

was a television studio which allowed the public to see what the cameras saw before broadcast, and then see it again on the television sets that could be bought for the home.

The inspiration of the 1939 Exhibition was the All-Europe House. It was designed by author Elizabeth Denby, who had spent a year touring Europe. She described her typical family: 'The father and mother are sound, sensible, fairly cultured artisan folk. He earns £3 10s a week. The son, aged 16, is intelligent and hard working. He is studying for a scholarship, and I am going to give him a room in which he will find pride. Then there are two schoolgirl daughters. I am planning to give that family a perfect home, within their means, yet complete with comfort and labour saving devices.'

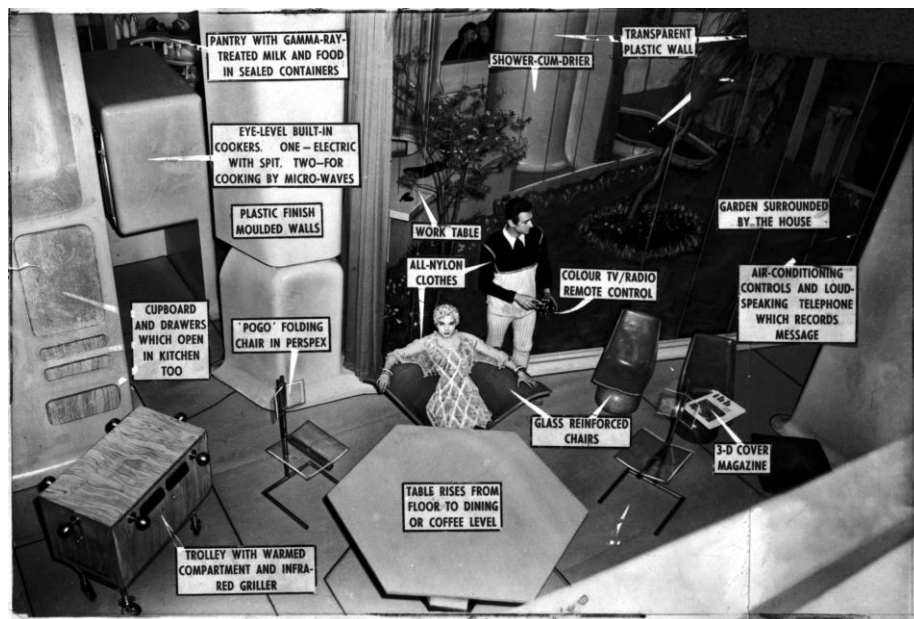
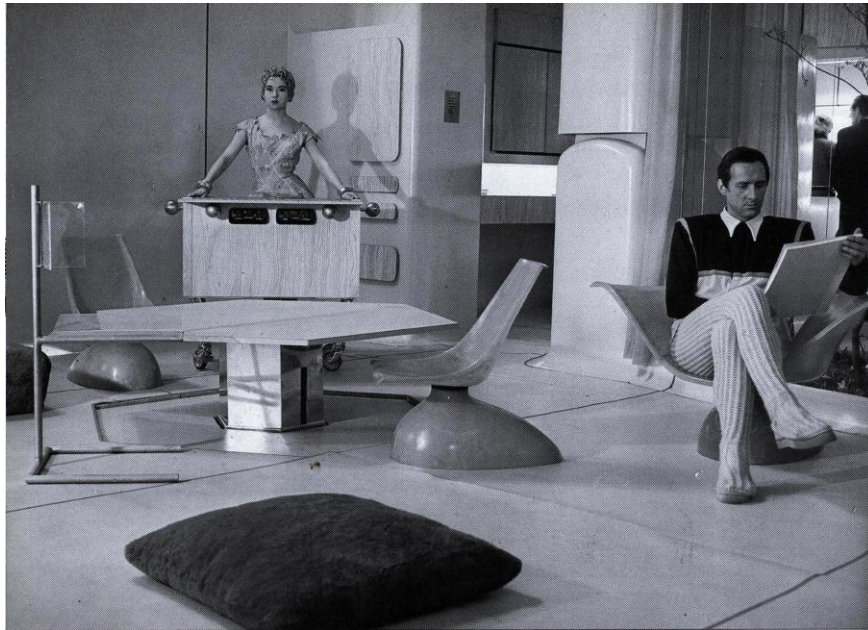
It capitalized on the best of Europe and was a vision of hope. By the end of year that hope had vanished and the best of Europe was at war. When the halls of Olympia re-opened to the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1947 it was to the celebratory theme of 'Beginning Again', focussing particularly on the array of factory-produced 'prefab' houses, including one version supplied by an aircraft firm made from melted down aluminium. Developments made for the battlefield were adapted to peacetime use – wood veneers used for aircraft propellers were made into decorative chair backs, an intercom system was adapted 'to control callers at the front door' and a revolutionary new way of cooking, the precursor of the microwave, was announced. In 1948 the King, who had seen at first hand the war damage to homes around the country, took a deep personal interest in the re-housing of Britain.



King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visiting the Ideal Home exhibition in 1948

In the 1950s, as scientists and film-makers concentrated on space, the householder discovered that many jobs around the home did not have to be done by professionals – you could do it yourself. By 1955 the exhibition was leading the way in the new-fangled world of DIY, backed by doctors who hailed the activity as therapeutic, and aided by a boom in furniture that came in packs, ready to assemble at home. Weekends were never the same again. In 1956 the house of the future came complete with microwave oven, colour television, answer-

phone and patio. The show was used by go-ahead Housing Minister Harold Macmillan to show how large town houses could be split up into council flats.



(above) The sitting room of the future at the 1956

(below) A glimpse at the 1956 exhibition of the house of the future, including notes on all the new inventions that were expected in future homes

Sixties homes were dominated by colour – and every shade at its brightest. Seaweed green tiles against two-tone red carpets, scattered with stainless steel stools and an obligatory harlequin-patterned vacuum cleaner. The highlight of the archetypal family home of the swinging sixties (a semi, costing £5500) would be the vinyl-fronted mini bar in the lounge. The father, earning £20 a week, drove a Ford Escort on petrol costing less than five shillings a gallon. In the Fablon-covered kitchen, under fluorescent strip lighting, the pride and joy was the easy-clean electric cooker. The family had just fitted a shower in the smallest room in the house.

Experimentation was the keynote of the seventies: wool wallpaper, smoked glass, pewter-coloured polished steel four-poster beds with curved canopies and gilded coronets, hostess trolleys, doorbell chimes, and a kitchen based on Elizabeth Taylor's in the movie 'Night Watch'. No home was complete without a portable

transistor radio, leather-look vinyl ice bucket, and zebra and ocelot cushions in acrylic fur. Environmental warnings began in 1975 with displays of rooms furnished from recycled waste – wall lights were made from old tins, furniture from corrugated papers and curtains from plastic shopping bags.



The Ideal House of 1975, including all the experimentation of the seventies

Sadly, by the eighties the emphasis was less on fashion and more on security as homeowners faced a rise in crime, particularly burglary. Locks, alarms, infra-red detectors and anti-burglar paints became vital household items. Soon the police were advising householders on garden plants, fencing and path materials to deter intruders. Retro was the current trend – much to the amusement of the Queen. When she came across a Victorian bath, complete with four legs and six taps, she laughingly admitted: 'My word, I'm afraid we have still got three like that.'

With the nineties, enthusiasm for protecting the environment reached a peak, and the 'green' house, was the key to the future. Recycling, saving energy and efficient management were emphasized. Furniture had to be made from sustainable sources of wood, the latest light bulbs were five times more efficient than standard, preservatives and additives were banned from the kitchen, baths were frowned on in favour of showers, soaps and shampoos were not tested on animals, cosmetics were vegetable based, and a brick in the toilet cistern helped save water. One new trend was the demand for holiday homes abroad, in Europe and America – a far cry from the first Ideal Home Exhibition, when many of the visitors wouldn't even get as far as Bognor in their lifetimes.

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